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ABSTRACT

"Contested Ground: Performance Accountability in Adult Basic Education" (ABE) is one of the most important books on adult literacy policy at the turn of the century. In it, Juliet Merrifield examines the critical issues of policy, practice, and theory with which the field is currently consumed. She and her colleagues maintain that the concept of "functional literacy" should be laid to rest. Educators should work to credit literacy skills to students and work to extend this knowledge and skill, based on the needs, desires, and interests of the adults, rather than dwelling on measuring how "functional" a learner is or needs to become. Merrifield reinforces Tom Sticht's phrase, "from the margins to the mainstream," to call for consensus and inclusiveness upon which to move the field. Merrifield's overall focus is the centrality of "performance accountability" through which ABE must demonstrate its success in terms of student and society outcomes, although her more fundamental topic is the conflicting perspectives that shape the politics and pedagogy of adult literacy education. Finally, Merrifield argues that it is necessary to struggle with critical issues of power, control, and direction that are steeped in conflict and not amenable to simple solutions. This requires dialog, research, action, and sharp values clarification in order to begin to move adult literacy to the mainstream of American public and political consciousness. (Contains 22 references.) (KC)

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REFLECTING ON CULTURE WARS IN ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION: EXPLORING CRITICAL ISSUES IN "CONTESTED GROUND"

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A review of: Merrifield, J. (1998). *Contested Ground: Performance Accountability in Adult Basic Education*. Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy.

> [W]hile the theories of New Literacy Studies are being applied in teaching, they have had much less currency at the level of educational systems and policies — institutions, funding, and accountability. Such a shift in the understanding of literacy means that 'performance' is defined differently and requires a different approach to accountability (Merrifield, 1998, p. 32)
>
> One's perspective on what is good performance in adult education, and what should be measured, depends on one's context and position. Learners' perspectives on what is a successful program may not be the same as policymakers' perspectives. Learners may want a program that treats them with respect, allows them to feel successful, provides them with the learning opportunities they want, and supports the results that are important to them, whether they are a credential or the ability to read to their children. Policymakers may not care about any of the process, but want a program that gets people into jobs. Educators, rooted in the kindergarten-through-higher-education tradition, may care most about credentials (Merrrifield, 1998, p. 33).

Overview

In her aptly titled "Contested Ground: Performance Accountability in Adult Basic Education," Juliet Merrifield lays out the critical issues of policy, practice, and theory that consume adult literacy/ABE discourse at the end of the Clinton era. Merrifield, a proponent of the New Literacy Studies (Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, and Bennett deMarrais, 1997), is a very vocal critic of functional literacy that has a long lineage in 20th century adult literacy, now associated with such policy initiatives like the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA). In no uncertain terms, she and her colleagues maintain the following:

> The concept of functional literacy should be laid to rest. The concept is flawed. Its definition is arbitrary, its measurement is problematic, and the phenomenon of "functioning in life" cannot readily be equated with literacy. Adults with limited

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> literacy skills should be credited with the skills and knowledge that they do have. Educators should start to build on and extend this knowledge and skill, based on the needs, desires, and interests of the adult learners, rather than dwelling on measuring how "functional" a learner is or needs to become, according to standardized tests (Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, and Bennett deMarrais, 1997, p. 213).

In her passionate call for consensus and inclusiveness upon which to move the field, in Tom Sticht's (2000) phrase, "from the margins to the mainstream," Merrifield's strong ideological position is somewhat muted in "Contested Ground." Yet the views expressed in *Life at the Margins, Literacy, Language, and Technology in Everyday Life* is evident, though more cautiously stated, in the NCSALL policy study as subtext, which will be teased out and expanded upon in this review.

Merrifield's overall focus is the centrality of "performance accountability" through which ABE "must demonstrate its success in terms of student and societal outcomes" (p. iv), although her more *fundamental* topic is the conflicting perspectives that shape the politics and pedagogy of adult literacy education. The central challenge, according to the author, is the need for the "system" to work out a coherent synthesis among conflicting agendas given an uneven distribution of power among the field's stakeholders and highly divergent epistemological assumptions among practitioners, students, policymakers, and researchers. Through this, Merrifield seeks a system of "mutual accountability. " This is a daunting task in an era of market globalization, welfare reform, mass immigration, a back to basics revival in education, and the emergence of a neoliberal/neoconservative political climate with the concomitant deconstruction of the liberal Democratic politics of the New Deal, New Frontier, Great Society. Nonetheless, "Contested Ground" is premised on the assumption that it is only in rising to the challenge of achieving consensus based on "mutual accountability," that ABE/adult literacy can survive the otherwise hopeless fragmentation and marginality that currently dominates the field.

Merrifield provides a superb overview of tensions facing the field and avenues, though no quick fixes, in ways by which to move forward. Whether or not and/or the extent to which the issue of "value" can be coherently articulated within a broad-based consensus on "what we want adult basic education to be and to become" (p. 2) within the current political, socio-economic climate, is far from resolved in "Contested Ground." This is so in no small part because the "we" of any potential consensus represents the diverse and often conflicting stakeholders who span the power and knowledge structure of contemporary American life.

Chapter One, "From Campaign to System: The Historical Context," provides a schematic overview of key societal, economic, governmental, and educational trends from the 1960s to the 1990s. The differences, according to Merrifield, are striking and there is little doubt about her general support of this shift:

> Campaigns have…a sense of urgency and crisis; a focus on short term results; a willingness to push funding to its limits by incorporating volunteers; and a

> concentration on action rather than accountability on recruitment and instruction rather than retention and results. Systems, in contrast, focus more on the long haul. They are characterized by professional staffs, an institutional base, funding for capacity-building…,a focus on quality, and the development of accountability mechanisms to measure effectiveness (Merrifield, 1998, p. 4).

Broad Societal Changes and a Shift to the Right

Notwithstanding the undeniable importance, and perhaps inevitability of this shift, there were also losses in the move toward system building from the era of the Great Society to that of the neoliberalism of the Clinton era, with the Reagan "Revolution" of the 1980s serving the role of midwife. As part of this ideological movement to the right among Republicans *and* Democrats, the conceptual shift from campaign to system paralleled the rise of ABE as a distinctive field linked to human capital development. This, in turn, exacerbated the marginalization of adult literacy as a separate entity, never securely grounded in federal policy, based on an ethos of localism, community development, and an instructional program geared to the self-identified needs of students, themselves, whether as community members or individuals (Quigley, 1997). As Quigley puts it, "[t]o the extent that the field [of adult literacy] had a significant role in determining the future of social policy on literacy [given the human capital development emphasis of ABE federal policy] that role is now effectively lost" (p. 87). With that loss, "[h]umanistic responses to learner needs have little role in serious policy formation" (p. 88). This shift was part of the cost and an aspect of broader historical trends in moving from campaign to system during the last four decades of the twentieth century.

"Global economic restructuring," or the transition from manufacturing to information in the emergence of the post-industrial society is the predominant socio-economic transformation that accompanied the shift from campaign to system. The need to retool a largely unprepared workforce for the informational era "require[d] a level of literacy which had never before been demanded of the blue collar workforce" (p. 5). Reports like *Workforce 2000* (Johnston and Packer, 1987) and *Jump Start* (Chisman, 1989) depicted the new need cast in dire forecast through an aura of demographic inevitability. The articulation of such problems served as the impetus that galvanized the business community to focus on adult literacy as a way of meeting their human resource needs, if not of the immediate present, than of the near future, to an almost certainty. However, "[a]s concerns about the skills of the workforce grew, preparation for employment became ever more explicitly the *primary* (emphasis added) purpose of education" (Merrifield, 1998, p. 5) at all levels. As Merrifield put it, "[t]he customers of adult education began to be defined as employers, interested in the 'product' of skilled employees" (p. 60).

Merrifield identified related social changes from the 60s to the 90s in the increase of rural and inner-city poverty, a widening gap between the wealthy and the poor, and a new wave of immigration, largely from Southeast Asia and Central America. In response to these socio-economic trends, policymakers began to focus on whether "participating in adult education help[s] people get a job, get off welfare, get off crime" (p. 7). This

narrowing of focus linked largely to human capital development, fighting crime, and welfare reform, is part of the historical shift from the so-called campaigns of the 60s to the system building of the 90s. Within such a context, "accountability" became linked with what government could obtain for its "investment" in ABE/adult literacy in reducing "social problems like unemployment, crime, drug abuse" (p. 6).

Reinventing Government

The emphasis on "performance accountability" was also a product of "reinventing government" initiatives largely through the appropriation of business metaphors. Thus, through the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 performance accountability terminology became couched in such language as "'customer,' 'results,' 'efficiency,' 'return on investment'" (pp. 7-8), with requirements for "federal agencies to clearly define their missions and to establish long-term strategic goals, as well as annual goals" (p. 8). Meanwhile, budget deficits and taxpayers revolts shifted the focus "to downsize government, and also to end the social support system created in the Great Society legislation of the 1960s" (p. 8). Amendments in federal adult education legislation in the 1980s and 1990s emphasized job training and welfare reform and "de facto have established new purposes and rationales for adult literacy education, dominated by preparing low-income adults for work" (p. 8).

In short, as part of the shift from campaign to system, the federal government has significantly cut its proportion of per capita spending for adult education compared to state spending. It has also tightened procedures for accountability, drawing on business language and concepts for its modeling of good programming, and narrowed the focus on what is defined as legitimate purposes for adult education, drawing largely on the "deficiency" model of adult literacy (Beder, 1990). The political culture, including the Democratic Party, has moved considerably to the right since the social reform era of the New Frontier and the Great Society (Shapiro, 1990; McElvaine, 1996). However, the technocratic persuasion of the "best and the brightest" (Halberstam, 1972), clearly in the ascendancy in our current, post-industrial era, was also a critical feature of political life in the 1960s.

"A Nation at Risk"

Merrifield points to similar changes in the educational system. The 1983 *Nation at Risk* policy document linked public education, and the concept of "excellence" to "employers needs for skilled workers" (p. 9) in the emerging post-industrial economy. This was accompanied by a 'back to basics' movement in K-12 education" (p. 9) and reform initiatives stemming not from educators, but from state legislators and governors. The impetus was the perceived informational needs of preparing future employees to meet the challenges of the new economic order. The importance of "accountability" and a renewed emphasis on standardized testing was a central part of this reform initiative. Although not specifically stated in "Contested Ground," the recognition within the political culture of a broad-based attack on progressive education is clearly present in Merrifield's policy report as subtext. This was led not only by conservative and moderate

Republicans, but by "new" Democrats, too, who began to stress "competence over ideology" for the sake of linking education to the perceived needs of the national interest. As put by Shapiro (1990), neoliberal Democrats like their Republican counterparts, emphasized "high technology, economic competitiveness, and human capital formation through education," though, like their liberal predecessors, also remained committed "to redress the deepening problems of poverty and inequity in American society" (p. 7). However, the extent to which they could balance these two tendencies particularly over such issues as NAFTA, welfare reform, reinventing government, and "investment" in education was not always clear.

The New Literacy Studies

It is within the contexts of these broad historical shifts that recent developments and any reform impetus within adult literacy education need to be grasped. What is excruciating for Merrifield (though the conflict is muted in her text) is that while these broader societal and political trends speak of a general shift to the right, progressive adult literacy theory of which she is an ardent proponent, continues to develop out of its own logical premises.

Merrifield does not quite come out and say this in "Contested Ground," but it is evident from *Life at the Margins* that any 21st century policy on adult literacy needs to be premised on the theoretical assumptions and best practices of what she refers to as the New Literacy Studies. The core tension between current policy and Merrifield's vision is partially manifested in the policy requirement of standardized and quantifiable forms of measurement, juxtaposed against the quest of grounding "performance accountability" in qualitative terms based on the actual needs of adult learners as defined by them.

What concerns Merrifield is the static understanding of adult literacy upon which standardized tests are based. The Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) and the 1975 Adult Performance level (APL) study upon which it was based, do focus on perceived "functional" needs of adults with low levels of literacy mastery and are therefore linked in certain ways with "real-life" learning. Yet they are premised on the mastery of discrete "tasks" that often ignore the more dynamic interaction between the world of print and the lives of adults that a more complex understanding of literacy as practices would illuminate. Merrifield is also concerned about the deficit model of literacy upon which the APL and CASAS are based though she ruefully acknowledges the widespread use of CASAS, of which she is critical, to buttress state-wide competency-based assessment systems in several states. As she puts it, "competing concepts of literacy –as skills or competencies and as social practices [which she favors] –are at the heart of what performance means" (p. 12). What is troubling about this conflict for Merrifield is that the more complex understanding of adult literacy upon which the New Literacy Studies are premised has little current standing in contemporary policy initiatives.

What Merrified critiques is public policy based upon a "view of literacy, as a discrete and fixed set of skills, transferable to one context to another, from which economic and social

development automatically follow (or at least upon which they are contingent)." From this perspective, "[t]he social impacts of literacy [removal from welfare, getting a job, crime reduction] appear to be the guiding purpose for public investment in literacy education" (p. 12) that from Merrifield's view is not a direct outcome of such work. While a sophisticated understanding of literacy has emerged with the New Literacy Studies, dominant social, economic and political trends from the 1960s to the 1990s mitigate against any broad-based policy orientation premised on such a framework. At stake is not merely "contested ground" in the uneven struggle for power, knowledge, and influence, but whether or not a dynamic consensus linking sound theory and practice to policy can at all emerge in the current political, social, and economic climate.

Chapter Two, "Unpacking Terms: Accountability and Performance," deals with the thorny issue of mediating the expectations of the various stakeholders of adult literacy education. Central to this discussion is the issue of "value" in that accountability inevitably points to the purpose of adult education as articulated by the various stakeholders. Acknowledging conflicting views and purposes among them, Merrifield calls for the differences over accountability to be "negotiated," notwithstanding significant differentials of power and epistemological assumptions among the various groups that comprise the constituency of adult literacy education.

The Dilemmas of Mutual Accountability

Notwithstanding her praxeological quest for an emergent consensus based upon inclusiveness and "mutual accountability," Merrifield's critique of the politics of literacy that drives the current adult basic education system is somewhat muted. However, she does critically point to the difference in terminology between "stakeholder" in referring to funders, taxpayers, employers, and state agencies while "[d]escribing learners as *participants* or *customers*" (p. 18) (original emphasis) -in effect, as "clients." As she puts it:

> The entire range of players, including learners and practitioners as well as those outside the learning enterprise have a legitimate concern with the outcomes of adult literacy education (p. 18).

Merrifield also makes a clear distinction between top-down models of accountability that "would start from Congress, or a state legislature, as funder of services to adult learners" (p. 18) and "[b]ottom-up accountability [which] makes adult education programs accountable to the people they serve" (p. 19).

In addition, she points out that "different groups of stakeholders may have different interests and informational needs" (18) that require negotiation through dialogue in the development of any comprehensive accountability system. She seeks a framework for accountability that both supports student learning goals on an individual basis as well as the interests of the financial supporters of adult literacy to demonstrate more system-wide efficacy. As she puts it, "[f]or performance accountability, responsibility to students for learning achievement needs to be combined with clarity and rigor in establishing goals

and outcomes, documenting achievements, and reporting" (p. 19). However, the issue is not only the need for additional rigor. It is as she elsewhere points out, different value systems that ground the motivation and expectations of individual students and practitioners often *against* those representing corporate and governmental interests of elites, who shape policy mandates by providing the basic financial support to the system.

Moreover, despite her critique of top-down perspectives, the stakeholders upon whom she concentrates, "leaders, policymakers and researchers" (p. 21) carry considerable weight in "Contested Ground." In fact the actual voices of students and front line program staff are marginal to "Contested Ground," though at least the voices of students permeate *Life at the Margins*. This in itself is an interesting peculiarity of the policy study genre, a far from neutral literary artifact.

Merrifield identifies the capitalist metaphor of "return on investment" in reporting to funders, "clearly the primary purpose on the minds of state directors right now" (p. 21) as the most important rational for "performance accountability." Such investment is framed on "what difference adult education makes in society" (p. 20) largely based on the deficit model of adult literacy that Merrifield clearly rejects though she does not powerfully level as immanent critique at this juncture in the text. In addition to "investment," although clearly related, these groups also draw at least on the *imagery* of "performance accountability" as a "[t]ool to sort out 'good' programs from 'bad,' ... particularly important for state directors, who often find they have less power than they would like to weed out bad programs from good, when state political relations are at stake" (p. 21).

Despite her use of scare quotes there is no discussion or analysis at this point of what state directors meant by "good" or "bad" programming. However, one suspects that what is valued among the top-down groups upon whom Merrifield focuses is programming that conforms to policy mandates which often conflict as she well knows, with other perceptions of effective programming identified by other stakeholders. As Merrifield wryly puts it, though, "[n]ot all purposes can be met at once [including those that focus instead on program improvement], and not all require the same measurement, data, or reporting" (p. 21). More importantly, not all purposes for "performance accountability" among all the groups of stakeholders that comprise the adult literacy constituency can be epistemologically or politically squared. This is the more fundamental issue that is muted at this point in Merrifield's discussion, though it can be elsewhere teased out in "Contested Ground" and is surely evident in *Life at the Margins*.

While not *explicitly* critiquing the views expressed above, Merrifield does level an *implicit* criticism in the paragraph that follows the discussion of the views of the literacy policy elite. As she puts it:

> A focus on educational improvement challenges a powerful, but outmoded metaphor for performance accountability borrowed from industry: the production line. The dominant metaphor in measuring results portrays adult education as a production process, with adult learners rolling off the end of the line, equipped with certain skills and knowledge which can be tested and reported in the same

> way that businesses make sure that widgets coming off the production line meet specifications (p.22).

Logically, this perspective challenges positivistic assumptions such as those that comprise the Workforce Investment Act and the National Reporting System which assume that direct and quantifiable relationships can be made for example, between hours of instruction and "measurable" learning gains. Such a view *could* be read as a fundamental critique of the dominant policy perspective, though Merrifield does not *directly* connect the analysis to the expressed views of the policy elite. She does not do so, one suspects, because the literary genre of her "report," requires a guise of neutrality which belies the view and tone assumed in *Life at the Margins*. Critique of the dominant view is *subliminally* expressed within "Contested Ground," but not in a frontal criticism against current policy perspectives. Rather, her critical subtext grounded in the perspective of the New Literacy Studies, seeps through the pages of this NCSALL report, but it is subtle and needs to be carefully teased out.

Total Quality Management

One of the key areas that Merrifield draws on to forge a consensus is humanistic management thought, particularly Total Quality Management (TQM) which, though far from neglectful of outcome assessment "is much more comprehensive and process oriented" (p. 22, citing, Stagg, 1992, p. 16). TQM focuses more on development, which is largely missing in the current quantitative outcome driven adult education system. In TQM the primary emphasis is on "continuous improvement where workers themselves monitor "inputs and outputs, how a process is working, assessing quality, and evaluating production" (p. 22). Merrifield points out that "TQM is concerned with accountability, but above all with quality" (p. 22). She quotes Sondra Stein, currently National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) Director for the Equipped for the Future (EFF) project, for further support on the potential importance of TQM for the field of adult literacy:

> TQM's approach to quality is based on the recognition that achieving quality is not magic: rather, it is a direct result of the conditions, the processes and structures that make up the "production process." Therefore, by paying careful attention to each step of the process, and analyzing it to see how it facilitates or impedes the process, contributes to or interferes with quality, an organization can have a powerful impact on increasing quality (p. 22, citing Stein, 1993, p. 3).

Merrifield also points to the burgeoning literature on the "learning organization" which "facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself" (p. 23, citing Pedler et. al., 1991). As Merrifield puts it, in the learning organization, "[l]earning, not just by individuals, but by the organization as a whole, is a way of responding to changing environments and multiple demands" (p. 23). Such learning is the antithesis of bureaucracy and requires a high level of trust and commitment among all the stakeholders in pursuit of a common vision. It is anything but squared with top-down policy mandates like the NRS supported by the State Directors of Adult Education.

Rather, for consensus to emerge based upon the precepts of TQM and literature grounded in the "learning organization," federal and state government will require a shift in its role from enforcer to that of participant in the development of an ABE/adult literacy system based on mutual accountability and negotiation. Obviously policy only receives its legal status through government, but the manner by which it emerges and mechanisms of evaluation, in principle, are open to a wide array of developments that may prove more, rather than less, democratic in the participatory sense. The extent to which *current* (2000) policy mandates circumscribe further development of the ABE/adult literacy system is a large issue that receives little *direct* examination in "Contested Ground," though the subtext bristles with critical commentary.

Qualitative Standards and the Impact of the Workforce Investment Act

Although "Contested Ground" was written before the enactment of the Workforce Investment Act and the accompanying National Reporting System, in her discussion of *performance accountability initiatives*, Merrifield traces back to the National Literacy Act of 1991, key steps that led up to its passage in 1997. She identifies the program quality indicators developed by the U.S. Department of Education in 1992 in which by 1996, they had "become the guiding framework for states in their efforts to define program quality and to hold programs accountable" (p. 23, citing Condelli, 1996, p. 14).

The quality indicators, which guided policy throughout the mid-90s, became increasingly diminished with the passage of the WIA, which has its own set of "uniform" criteria. Merrifield points out that "there are no requirements for states to report their indicator measures or standards to the federal government" (p. 23) and therefore, little power of enforcement. Also, given the importance of performance outcomes, the quality indicators were limited, on her interpretation, because they focused primarily on process. Yet, in such a marginal system as ABE with scant resources, the quality indicators point to important aspects of program development such as educational gains, program planning, curriculum development and instruction, staff development, support services, recruitment, and retention that could provide a broad framework for coherent system reconstruction. Such would be particularly the case if the emphasis were more on the framework the quality indicators *provide* rather on enforcement and legal sanctions as pervasive within the WIA legislation.

Merrifield states that "[p]rogram quality efforts are just a first step toward performance accountability" (p. 24). The concern, though, is that with the current emphasis on "performance accountability" based upon the "standardized, measurable, and objective" criteria set by the NRS, any emphasis on programs struggling with quality indicators or other complex form of measurement, will be marginalized. This is so due to the effort required to adhere to the new standards that have emerged through a top-down process and mandated upon the system rather than worked out in dialogue with the broad constituency that comprises the field of adult literacy education. In short, talk of quality indicators has gone out of fashion with the increased focus on performance outcomes.

A similar dilemma faces programs seeking to develop performance accountability measurements based on the National Institute for Literacy's Equipped for the Future (EFF) project while also building capacity to meet the requirements of the NRS if they desire to qualify for federal funding. The WIA allows EFF standards to count as "secondary measures." However these do not meet the requirements of the reporting system for "a uniform set of quantitative measures" (p. 26) designed to illuminate direct correlations between certain *inputs* of instructional hours and direct learning *gains* based upon standardized criteria of objective measurement upon which Merrifield puts little stock.

Finally Merrifield points to the "seven categories of outcome measures" that the state directors of adult education agreed upon as the criteria for evaluating a program's effectiveness: "economic impact, credentials, learning gains, family impact, further education and training, community impact, customer satisfaction" (p. 26, citing Condelli & Kutner, 1997, p. 3). Depending on the construction of the evaluation framework, such categories *could* correlate with the EFF standards, for example. The latter focus more on process or *how* adults learn, though closely linked to the specific "role maps" of worker, citizen and family member. However, given the normative assumptions of assessment for "uniform" measurement based upon the positivistic assumption of "objectivity," neither the Office of Vocational and Adult Education nor the state directors of adult education were inclined to move toward any complex qualitative design as implied in the EFF standards. In any event, the NRS train was well underway by then with the emphasis on quantifiable, measurable standards that directly link the inputs of education to the desired social outcomes.

Conflicting Perspectives on Literacy

Merrifield concludes this second chapter with a discussion of different view of literacy through which she levels her immanent critique against the dominant system, though in a somewhat muted way. Specifically, she contrasts the concept of "literacy as competency" that dominates policy perspectives with the concept of "literacy as social and cultural practices," the position she favors.

She points to the Adult Performance Level (APL) study and to the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS), as prime examples of the literacy as competency perspective. These complementary frameworks laid the groundwork for the competency-based movement in adult basic education and made an important contribution in shifting focus away from a school-based approach that defined literacy as merely the mastery of decontextual reading skills to the attainment of "tasks related to everyday life" (p. 27). The more recently developed National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) also draws on the literacy as competency thesis. From this perspective "literacy is [viewed as] a technical skill which is transferable to multiple contexts, and that a single set of competencies can be defined" (p. 28). These various approaches assume:

> that competencies can be measured in formal tests, and that there is an equivalence between how well a person completes the pencil and paper test and

> his or her ability to perform a task in real life. And finally, it assumes that the tasks chosen for the test are both important to everyone and can be accomplished in only one way (p. 28).

The competency-based approach also "assume[s] that knowing how well someone reads tells us something about how they carry on the rest of their lives" (p. 28), in short, they point to a one-to-one correspondence between their mastery and adult functioning, a position rejected by Merrifield. As she puts it, "[p]erhaps the central issue is who decides what is competence, and who chooses the tasks" (p. 29). For Merrifield, it is clear that such activity lay with the adult literacy learners rather than the specialists who developed the various competency-based assessment formats. While she assumes this position, she does not strenuously advocate for it in "Contested Ground." Yet it is clear in *Literacy at the Margins* that what is particularly troubling for Merrifield is the linkage of competency-based adult basic education to the deficit model of adult literacy in which the fundamental problem is that learners are lacking in certain cognitive ability or "survival" skills. As she and her colleagues put it, "many people who perform below targeted levels for 'functional literacy' may nevertheless be functioning adequately, or to their own satisfaction in their everyday lives" (Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, and Bennett deMarrais, 1997, p. 11). Commenting further they state that:

> Proponents of the idea of functional literacy assume a direct connection between the ability to interpret text in a life-skill task (for example, reading a bus timetable) and the ability to perform that task in real life (use a public transportation system effectively). Our profiles suggest that equating literacy with everyday life may be too simple. Although we are a print-based society, there are many ways of accomplishing life tasks effectively. The people we profile are very 'functional.' They pay taxes, hold jobs, may own homes, pay rent on time, shop, raise children, and are generally good citizens (though they seldom vote. Their literacy and learning strategies demonstrate how they function with limited literacy (p. 212).

This hard-hitting critique against the epistemological assumptions of competency-based education that there is a direct correlation between literacy development and social functioning is present though muted in "Contested Ground." A probing of the NCSALL policy report requires a coming to terms with Merrifield's critical subtext expressed more fully in *Literacy at the Margins*.

Merrifield's views are most explicitly presented through her discussion of "literacy as social and cultural practices." The core assumption of the New Literacy Studies is that the role of literacy in facilitating social and personal goals is contextual to the specific individual or group of individual involved. Central from this perspective, are the social contexts in which literacy and language are embedded and their specific roles in mediating those contexts, in which the impact of literacy may be central or peripheral. On this interpretation, literacy is a contextually grounded intervening variable rather than a "technical skill, which once acquired can be applied to many different tasks" (Merrifield, 1998, p. 30). The advocates of the New Literacy Studies identify many

"literacies" rather than a singular literacy that apply to the various social contexts wherein individuals mediate print in relationship to various social behavior and attitudes. As Merrifield puts it, *"[r]eading* has no meaning unless we say who is reading in what setting, and for what purpose –we have to separate the medium (text) from the message (meaning)" (p. 30) as well as to discern their relationship.

In her discussion of the New Literacy Studies, Merrifield distinguishes between "literacy practices," "literacy events," and "domains." Literacy practices refer to the "'[g]eneral cultural ways of utilizing literacy' (p. 31, citing Barton, 1994, p. 5) that people draw upon in the varied contexts in which they live their livess–c hool, work, home, social groups, neighborhoods" Literacy practices are linked to power relationships and to values as well as behavior. They are the practices where the text meets the world that people engage in during their everyday lives and they are quite varied. Literacy events refer to the specific reading tasks in which individuals engage during the course of their everyday lives such as a job manual, a newspaper, a food package, a note from school, or a magazine article. Domains refer to "the broad contexts of life in which we operate" (p. 31), the key social environments that give shape to our lives, whether the home, the workplace, or a neighborhood or community setting. Each of these domains are "shaped by the broader culture and by class, gender, ethnicity, and regional variations" (p. 31). It is from these broad cultural environments that the notion of "multi-literacies" arises to help explain the relationship between the realm of print within them and the social contexts in which they are embedded.

Any approach to literacy defined as meaning making, which is a central assumption of the New Literacy Studies, only makes sense through the mediation of the various literacy practices, literacy events, and domains in which people are engaged. As Merrifield ruefully points out, though:

> [W]hile the theories of the New Literacy Studies are being applied in teaching, they have had much less currency at the level of educational systems and policies –institutions, funding, and accountability. Such a shift in the understanding of literacy means that "performance" is defined differently and requires a different approach to accountability (p. 32).

As an ardent advocate of the New Literacy Studies, the full import of this subtext is muted throughout the main body of "Contested Ground." Instead of pushing the logic of the New Literacy Studies as the foundation for establishing a contemporary adult literacy policy she concentrates on the dilemmas of establishing performance goals that are too loose or too tight. Yet as she also states, "[t]he challenge [rather] is to come to a common agreement that fits the theories and research, fits society's aims, and fits the practice" (p. 35). She is on sound ground to assume that such "agreement can only be the result of a broad-based public debate" (p. 35). Yet she *could* have taken the position that the literacy as social and cultural practices perspective that grounds the New Literacy Studies is the only viable foundation upon which policy can be established. Moreover, there is a certain reification implicit in what she refers to as "society's aims" as if there is a uniform intention or social mind and as if advocates of the New Literacy Studies do not, in part,

make up society. This is not to deny that Merrifield nowhere takes such a stance within "Contested Ground" which she surely does in the following:

> When literacy is defined as social practices, rooted in context, intertwined with social relationships and power, constantly changing and being changed, the what is important is what students do with what they learn. Standardized tests are not very useful as guides of this kind of performance, precisely because they do not measure what students can do with their knowledge, only on whether they perform well on the test (p. 34):

It is only that she fails unequivocally to argue for this position throughout the text and insist on its foundational role in any construction of a viable policy even as "society's aims" are factored in. As a policy report, such advocacy may be deemed inappropriate given the importance of the guise of neutrality as an inherent discourse strategy of the genre. Yet what is sacrificed is a coherent framework upon which she might have constructed her argument consistent with the position taken in the ethnographic study, *Life at the Margins.*

Chapter Three, "Capacity to Count and Perform" shifts from the broad focus of the earlier chapters to probe more extensively into issues related to assessment and program evaluation. As Merrifield points out, the task of creating a "national accountability system" is huge and complex. It "requires not only clarity about the multiple purposes for adult education, but also capacity among the diverse institutions which provide educational services" (p. 36).

Enduring Problems of Capacity and Values

By capacity, Merrifield refers in part to the ability of the adult basic education system in light of its marginality to adequately meet the needs of the extensive and diverse adult population that in theory might utilize its services. This is reflected statistically in the limited numbers of individuals who participate in the system as well as the troubling retention rates and the limited learning gains on average achieved at least as measured by standardized tests. In an important monograph Quigley (1997) points out the dire statistics that speak volumes of the current system's incapacity to effectively provide services. As he puts it:

> [F]unded programs in adult literacy attract only 8 percent of those eligible for them…Meanwhile, some 20 percent of those who say they will attend do not show up…Of those who do, the overall attrition rate during the 1993-1994 program year was 74 percent (p. 8).

While some of these statistics are a decade old, they point to enduring "facts" that shape the field. As Quigley puts it,"[w]hat other area of education could live with such numbers?" (p. 8). In discussing the value of sampling, John Comings, Director of the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) puts it this way: "[t]he results might not make us look very good, but if it was done right this approach

would also identify ways to improve performance" (Comings, 1999, NLA). For Comings that would require a small sampling through multiple measures to provide a better understanding of the ways in which learning is taking place throughout the system as *currently* funded that then can be utilized as a basis for improving it. This perspective resonates with that of the New Literacy Studies for which Merrifield might have argued more persuasively and consistently throughout "Contested Grounds" as the *basis* for moving forward in the process of gaining the broader legitimacy for the field at the level of policy and public perception. However, one cannot exaggerate the daunting nature of such a challenge, as she so well points out, that are not susceptible to "quick fixes."

Merrifield (1998) points to additional problems that make problematic efforts to develop an effective performance accountability system. These include "absence of important basic data," "[d]ifficulties in collecting valid data," "double counting and undercounting," and lack of understanding among program staff "of the purpose of the data collected." These problems are due in part to lack of adequate staffing and turnover which are endemic to the ABE/adult literacy system. More fundamentally, they are also due to doubts that many program staff have "about whether the information collected does measure real performance" (p. 38).

To the extent that these problems are based on standardized tests that measure literacy skills or functional tasks in isolation of the broader context of usage, Merrifield shares such doubts, even though her advocacy of such a position is understated in "Contested Ground." As she puts it, "[w]hen asked to report numbers, literacy programs will indeed report numbers –but when they see no purpose in the numbers, do not use them themselves, never see reports based on the numbers, and place their own priorities on providing learning opportunities, there is little incentive to make the numbers accurate" (p. 39). In effect the field is marked by a high degree of passive resistance wherein many hard pressed practitioners will work the system based upon their own survival needs, but for which they lack the capacity to fully implement mandated assessment requirements and often do not believe in their merit.

A Case Study of Three States

Merrifield shifts the focus to an examination of three states, Connecticut, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania, that "already have begun to develop performance accountability systems" (p. 39). Connecticut's focus was the development of a data management system which was "state-driven, rather than federally driven" (p. 40) in response to a mid-80s report, *Looking to the 21st Century: A Strategic Plan for Adult Education* to establish a competency-based adult education program by 1990, that ultimately incorporated CASAS (Adult Education Study Committee, 1985; Demetrion, 1999). This was a top-down initiative driven by the CT Bureau of Adult Education that garnered considerable passive resistance throughout the state even as certain programs within Connecticut drew upon the competency-based focus to strengthen both instruction and program management. One of the major flaws pointed out by Merrifield (1998) and acknowledged by the CT State Director (p. 40) was the lack of local program involvement in system design that resulted in much of the resistance that the state

experienced. Although Merrifield, as an advocate of the New Literacy Studies, is critical of standardized tests like CASAS, she does not explicitly raise as an issue its adoption by the state, or to identify it as a major problem in itself in her analysis of Connecticut's "performance accountability system."

In response to demands from the state capitol and legislature, Arkansas "has approached accountability through the development of performance funding" (p. 42). 50% of state funding is based upon literacy rates in a particular locale. The other 50% is performance-based as determined by the "effective and efficient" criteria for funding set up by the state. The primary motivator in the state is to link accountability with economic impact. As the state director puts it, "[s]oft ideas are not cutting it, they [the legislature] won't fund it" (p. 42). As in Connecticut, local programs have exhibited "resistance" in implementing the new standards though, according to the state director, "most programs have accepted 'that something has to change'" (p. 42). Merrifield identifies as one of the major local concerns in Arkansas apprehension in the capacity of programs to meet the standards rather than any questioning of their viability, although it is clear that the State Director of Adult Education raises such concerns. As he puts it:

> Policymakers don't understand adult education, they focus on return on investment, they don't understand softer life skills, it's hard to sell to them. There is more to the story than jobs and income. Sometimes self esteem, confidence building, motivation is the best you can do for a student. But you have to tie it to something stronger to satisfy the legislators (p. 42):

In her identification of issues raised by the Arkansas example, Merrifield comments that "determining what is good 'performance' in terms that satisfy both practitioners and legislators is very challenging" (p. 43). Yet in Arkansas, it is policy driving practice rather than the reverse. In the state director's words, "I have to hope that the folks at the local level are student-driven, because I can't be" (p. 43). This reality is part of the broader shift in ABE/adult literacy that Merrifield identified in Chapter One from that of campaign to system from the 1960s to the 1990s. Given the "reality" of the Workforce Investment Act and the National Reporting System, the dilemma identified by the Arkansas director, is very much a national one.

In Pennsylvania there is more of an emphasis on local participation in creating an accountability framework that matches the primary focus on program improvement. The State's Director of ABE decided not to focus on standardized data collection because, given the current weakness of the field to provide high quality services and the lack of sufficient staff resources and training, "all that would tell me is that I'm not getting good learner outcomes" (p. 44). The state launched Project Equal in 1994 "to build capacity of local education providers to collect and *use* (emphasis added) data about their learners and their programs" (p. 44). The State Director, Cheryl Keenan identified three critical assumptions, the following two highlighted here, that grounded the project:

- assessment plays a key role in quality service delivery, when integrated with instruction.

- using data to analyze program issues helps to determine solutions, and participatory decision-making involving staff and administrators is optimal (p. 44)

Through a "diffusion" approach "pilot sites (innovative local programs) have been selected" (p. 44). Participants at the sites reviewed certain data (presumably qualitative) on their programs *after which* they "plan[ned] program improvement measures" (p. 44). That is, program needs drove accountability rather than the reverse as in Connecticut and Arkansas. Unlike these other two states, in Pennsylvania, the state plan was suffused with local participation in the very *construction* of the accountability process through a combined bottom-up/top-down synergy.

Despite the significant differences among the three states which Merrifield well explains she does stress the "commonalities." These are the length of time required to build the system and the importance of local "program participation" that all three states *now* include "in system planning and design" (p. 45) or perhaps more realistically, in system refinements and in galvanizing support for the system already in place. Merrifield also mentions the difficulties the three states have in data collection at the local level, "with establishing accurate and reasonable indicators of performance" (p. 45) as well as with problems of training and support in helping local programs evaluate the data for their own purposes.

All of these issues are obviously of critical importance, yet what is at least, if not more central to Merrifield is the issue of value, and the values that she espouses are grounded in the precepts of the New Literacy Studies. From such a vantage point it is clear that Merrifield favors the approach to "performance accountability" developed in Pennsylvania as opposed to the other two states because of the emphasis on localism, participatory involvement, and making program needs determine the framework for the development of a viable accountability system. Yet she is unwilling to claim the central ground of *value* in staking out her *own* position as part of her analysis of the three states based upon the framework laid out in the Pennsylvania model that she favors. No such reticence on the issue of values marks the pages of *Life at the Margins*.

It is, however, in the very next section, "Measuring performance" that Merrifeld makes the *general* point that values are central to what should count as performance accountability. Yet she did not specifically tie this section to the previous discussion on the three states. In this section and the following ones that conclude Chapter Three Merrifield expresses her most basic beliefs, which conflict in "Contested Ground" with the more neutral stance she elsewhere takes. As she well understands, "[t]he capacity to be accountable is not only about programs' ability to collect data, but also about the quality and value of that data" (p. 46). She reflects on the ways in which assessment is often "used to sort people into categories" (p. 46) as well as to fail to measure what their stated purposes claim. She points out that assessment sometimes is one-sided which often measures the wrong things and stresses counting for its own sake that elides the issue of purpose and value. As she puts it, "[t]o avoid a numbers game, you have to measure what you value and value what you measure" (p. 47). Although their assessment

systems may contain many of the *technical* problems that Merrifield identifies, what is more problematic is not that Connecticut and Arkansas accountability systems are not grounded in values. Rather, from the precepts of the New Literacy Studies, the concern is in what they *do*, in fact, value, functional literacy linked to discreet task-based coping strategies and economic indicators as the primary purpose of adult literacy education.

Merrifield's concluding pages of Chapter Three provide an extremely valuable overview of the critical issues facing the field in grappling effectively with the complexity of "performance accountability" as a political/pedagogical phenomenon in a field where there is no consensus. Her discussion of "input," "process," "output," and "outcome" indicators is useful in emphasizing the importance of various contextual factors that ultimately contribute to longer-term impacts of programs. As she well states it, "[n]o single indicator can suffice to measure performance, particularly of as complex an enterprise as adult education" (p. 48). There is also a need, as she points out, to provide scope in performance accountability, for the "unexpected" or unintended impact of learning, which may sometimes be of more importance than that which students intended to learn when they entered the program.

Merrifield accepts the importance of standardized tests in the sense that "[t]hey enable 'learning' to be compared across learners and across programs" (p. 51), obviously an issue for State Directors of Adult Education. Yet the impact may not be as clear as those advocating for standardized tests may expect since "adult education programs vary considerably with respect to the nature and level of skills they emphasize, and the kinds of students with whom they work" (p. 51). Then there is the question of the variability of the tests and whether or not test scores measure anything other than test-taking ability with any definitive accuracy.

Merrifield briefly discusses alternative approaches to assessment "such as portfolios, demonstrations, narrative and ethnographic approaches to learning evaluation" (p. 54) which are congruent with the contextual philosophy that grounds the New Literacy Studies. Although the literature on alternative or qualitative assessment is profuse (Lytle and Wolfe, 1989; Fingeret, 1992), the discussion in "Contested Ground" is extremely abbreviated because, as Merrifield puts it, "authentic assessment…does not provide policymakers and administrators the opportunity to compare learning across learners and across programs" (p. 54).

The problem, simply put, is that "alternative assessment will not meet policy needs" (p. 55). Yet as Wolfe and Lytle (1989) comment, which is applicable to what Merrifield refers to as the New Literacy Studies, in a qualitative approach "[w]hat gets assessed…is not necessarily the same for each learner, but rather is determined by learners' goals and literacy needs within contexts they define" (p. 52). In short, Merrifield cedes much epistemological ground on assessment to the dictates of policy whether or not the types of and approaches to it "allowed" meet the learning needs of students and accurately evaluate what they do learn particularly among students whose "gains" on standardized tests seem minimal or non-existing.

Problems Inherent in Standardized and Qualitative Assessment: Enduring Conflicts

To gain legitimacy, approaches to assessment congruent with the assumptions inherent within the New Literacy Studies can only emerge by shifting beyond the quantitative metaphor, which is grounded in the politics and epistemology of control, as the primary measure of value, toward an embrace of qualitative assessment. That will prove no easy feat in terms of gaining legitimacy in the policy arena, though possible through the utilization of sampling and multi-measures of assessment to meet system-wide as well as programmatic needs for valid *and* useful information (See Merrifield's discussion of this in Chapter Four).

Yet, without such a shift the ground upon which the New Literacy Studies can be constructed, as a *public* stance, is cut asunder since the concept of literacy as social practices is not easily factored into the statistical data and the positivistic and behavioral assumptions that ground the quantitative metaphor. Merrifield is not overly optimistic about attaining such a prospect for the field that a narrative or ethnographic approach to assessment would illuminate, though she is not without hope. As she sees it, "new research could break through the barriers of an approach that is widely disliked and create new forms of assessment that are firmly bases in new understandings of the nature of literacy and cognitive understanding" (Merrifield, p. 55).

The problem is not so much the lack of research on contextual learning which is profuse, but its *legitimacy* as a theoretical underpinning among policymakers to enable sound theory and best practices to drive policy on accountability and in the identification of the social purposes of adult literacy. Therefore, the issue is not only that of knowledge, but of the power/knowledge relationship through which the *construction* of social knowledge that matters is formed. It is on this issue of the politics of literacy with which the field struggles. It is only by extensive dialogue and negotiation through influential informational, organizational and political networks that the field *may* be able work through the maelstrom of conflicting perceptions that mark the discourse system of adult literacy education.

The difficulties in the effort to create such a dynamic consensus may seem insurmountable given the sharply conflicting views that shape the field. Yet the political power that it could unleash in order to move adult literacy "from the margins to the mainstream" (Sticht, 2000) is essential for the field so that it can garner the resources and legitimacy it needs to effectively do its work. Such an effort, in my view, would require nothing short of transforming adult literacy education from a profession to a social movement, a daunting undertaking in the neoliberal political climate of the postindustrial society.

Chapter Four, "Building for the Future," Merrifield (1998) concludes her report by laying out a framework for and encouraging public "debate and action that addresses both accountability and performance" (p. 56). The challenges are to:

- define performance –what literacy education should achieve, for individuals, for communities, and for society;
- develop mutual accountability relationships at all levels of the system, from local program to national level
- build the capacity of the field to be accountable by harnessing existing resources and providing new ones for technical assistance, professional development, support, and information
- design new accountability technologies to measure performance, report on results, and provide the information tools needed for program improvement (p. 56).

I will review these points below.

Defining Performances

Merrifield points to the "concept of *literacy* (emphasis added) [that] lies at the heart of defining success for adult literacy and basic education programs" (p. 56). She critiques traditional definitions based upon "a single scale (from illiterate to literate)" (p. 56) such as reflected in standardized test scores. Instead she advocates for the position of literacy as a set of social practices specific to particular contexts rather than to any "objective" measurement of discreet "literacy skills" based on standardized paper and pencil tests that do not directly correlate with practical application.

As previously stated, the New Literacy Studies are premised on the concept of "multiliteracies." Therefore, any coherent assessment system based upon such premises needs to honor the "multiple purposes and uses of literacy and multiple goals and expectations for literacy education" (p. 56). This also means that a direct correlation can not always be drawn between input (intensity and duration of instruction), pre-selected goals, and overall improvement of general reading skills. As Merrifield puts it, "[w]hen reality has many faces, to decide on a single portrait of performance would reduce the complexity to a least common denominator that pleases no one" (pp. 56-57).

Merrifield stresses the importance of "multiple performances" for an accountability system that "must look for commonalities as well as differences" (p. 57). She argues that the concept of "multiliteracies" "must underpin definitions of performance for accountability" (p. 57) in which "[m]ultiple performances must be linked in a framework and overarching sense of purpose within which most people can place themselves" (p. 57). It is within such a "common framework" such as worker, family, or community literacy upon which various programs might specialize that "different performances can be nested" (p. 57). "These specialized purposes (or definitions of performance) would then be linked with specific performance indicators and measurement which would track their performance separately" (p. 57). This discussion resembles that of Quigley's (1997) "Four Working Philosophies."

Merrifield's discussion is quite evocative at this point in creating a framework for assessment grounded in the precepts of the New Literacy Studies with the central point of

linking literacy to the varied contexts or "social practices" in which they are embedded within the lives of individuals. What is central to her argument is the necessity for balance between "commonalities" and "differences" in creating frameworks for assessment that can meet the needs of multiple stakeholders and potentially establish the dynamic consensus required in moving the field forward "from the margins to the mainstream." In addition, she makes an important distinction between system and program levels of accountability which cannot be held to the same criteria of performance given the many "intervening variables" that make problematic any direct correlation between the two. Still, she does argue for their synchronicity, without which "both will fail to meet their purposes" (p. 58). In short, and this is the crux of Merrifield's argument:

> The overall vision, purposes and practice of adult education need to be part of a common framework that links "big picture" system goals and "small picture" classroom activity. Unless they fit together, the system cannot meet its goals (p. 58).

The underlying dilemma remains, however on whether the goals of policy and the practices and purposes of the New Literacy Studies can be brought together within a common framework given the power differentials in a political climate governed by a deficit model of adult literacy education. The question still to be determined in any reform of the field is whether existing social policy will drive practice or whether best practices and sound research will shape policy. For the latter to prevail, the field will have to enact a very powerful level of political mobilization.

Developing Mutual Accountability Relationships

Merrifield's vision is premised on the attainment of an ideal, that of "mutual accountability relationships" in a social environment and political culture where the differentials among the various stakeholders that comprise the field are sharp. Nonetheless, in Merrifield's vision, "every 'player' would be both accountable to other players and held accountable by them" (p. 59). Such a system would be "negotiated (original emphasis) between the stakeholders in a process that engages all the players in clarifying expectations, designing indicators of success, negotiating information flows, and building capacity" (p. 60). In this system of mutual accountability "every player has the capacity to hold others accountable" through "efficient and effective information flows [that] enable all players to hold and be held accountable and act to improve services" (p. 60).

Such a construct assumes a level of potential social and political consensus that simply may not exist. Rather, the Habermasian ideal of communicative competence through the better argument, in practice, often, though not inevitably, gives way to power constructs that shape discourse and determine what knowledge is deemed legitimate, including what is central and what is relegated to the peripheral. Merrifield's discussion of "informational flows for mutual accountability" where information "must flow up down, and across the system" (p. 63) represents a daunting vision of societal consensus. Its

emergence would require a radical reconstruction in the ways in which the field's constituents come to understand the value of adult literacy education including a considerable loosening up of the current power relationships among them. However daunting, her vision of mutual accountability *could* become a platform for reform, which, however unlikely, perhaps, would require intensive political mobilization to effect needed system change that simultaneously satisfied large segments of the literacy constituency.

Political reality is certainly constrained by current power arrangements and history. Yet these forces do not *determine* the future, though they surely influence it. System reconstruction, no mean feat, would require a degree of consensus about direction and grass roots mobilization based on sound theory, best practices and a social policy of equity and social justice that *historically* has never existed within the field. It would require some element of embracing literacy as a campaign and not merely as a profession and maintaining such zeal as an essential component in the systems that the field's participants have and will construct. Literacy is not only a "business," but also a "cause" based on a vision of individual, societal, and cultural reconstruction. Both of these images are needed to sustain a field presence at the table of policy formation and public opinion if its precepts are to shape policy rather than the current reality of social policy grounded in an imagery of control, shaping the field.

Building Capacity for Accountability

Merrifield emphasizes the central point that criteria for accountability both needs to be linked to program effectiveness in *meeting* student goals and to organizational capacity so that agencies can adequately *achieve* such outcomes. This requires investment in programs sometimes even before they have the capacity to engage in effective performance accountability, in order that they may eventually be able to do so. As Merrifield puts it, "[i]t is difficult to have a Management Information System when there is no management system" (p. 64). As she further states, "[b]uilding capacity to collect, analyze, and use information requires staff development, technology, and technical support" (p. 64), to say nothing about the importance of a sustainable funding base.

Drawing on the views of NLA list-serv moderator, David Rosen, Merrifield points out the importance of linking levels of accountability to levels of funding. According to Rosen (1997) programs "funded at $200 per student per year should [only] be held accountable to keep records of the students served and how the money was spent" (Rosen, 1997, cited in Merrifield, 1998, p. 65). This is so lest demands for program accountability overwhelm scarce program resources that should be focused instead on teaching and in building program capacity. "A program funded at $1,000 per student per year should have a higher intensity and duration of services, a good retention rate, a solid plan for staff and program development, and should meet many other indicators of program quality" (p. 65). Rosen maintains that it is only with funding "[at] $5,000 per student per year or more" that it would be realistic "to see learning gains measured with valid and reliable instruments (not necessarily or only standardized tests)" (p. 65). However, even in well-funded programs that have the capacity to assess the impact of

instruction on learners, the criteria upon which such an assessment system and the broader epistemological issues that inform them are based, still looms as a large issue

For Merrifield as with Rosen, putting capacity building *ahead* of, or at the least, simultaneously *with* requirements for performance accountability, is the only logical and fair way to operate the ABE/adult literacy system. This is an important insight that could shed invaluable light upon criteria required for funding. However, its implementation is problematic given the "survival of the fittest" Social Darwinism that governs so much of the field. This social philosophy, which destroys or further marginalizes smaller programs, is both linked to a highly competitive funding climate with an emphasis on accountability based on "objective and measurable" standards and to a social policy linking adult literacy education to a workforce, anti-welfare focus. In short, an ideology of control dominates both the epistemological and political power centers that allocate state and federal funding. Any putting of capacity building *before* accountability mandates will require a significant reconstruction of the system and flies in the face of current legislation as articulated in the Workforce Investment Act and National Reporting System. The consensus that Merrifield seeks would be extremely difficult to construct from the *current* power/knowledge dynamics that shape the field.

Whether system reform can *emerge* which significantly restructures such dynamics is another matter. It is difficult to be sanguine about its prospects. This is especially the case without a mobilization of grass roots energies that may not prove so easy to accomplish in our current neoliberal era of system building, geared to shaping adult literacy education to meet the lower-rung needs of the post-industrial society. This would necessitate that grass roots literacy advocates play a major role in the raising of political consciousness within the public sector and among legislators in order to influence the shaping of the field in some of the many directions identified by Merrifield.

This may well require the exercise of considerable political power among grass roots constituents in order to *forge* a new consensus that does not currently exist. That would prove to be no mean undertaking. Thus far, there is little evidence to suggest that the progressive literacy community is likely to mount such a collective effort in mobilization and advocacy in order to *change* the direction of current literacy policy. That does not mean that it can not or will not do so in the future, but prospects do not point to its likely occurrence. Without the leadership, or at least the very strong involvement, of the progressive literacy community it is doubtful that the pedagogy, which informs the New Literacy Studies, can provide the integrating focus for any restructuring of the field beyond the positivistic and behaviorist paradigms that govern current policy directions.

Designing Accountability Technologies

Merrifield sheds valuable insight in identifying problems in constructing a viable accountability system as well as offering a framework in her discussion of the more technical aspects of accountability design. She stresses the importance of the need for such data, usually numbers, to be "useful and used" (original emphasis), while at the same time acknowledging that different stakeholders seek different kinds of information.

She points out that current assessment tools do not typically provide the kind of information needed to come to terms with what ultimately emerges as a wide-range of outcomes, whether anticipated or not, either at the student or programmatic level. This would require an in-depth contextual understanding of such factors based upon a different epistemological framework than the dominant philosophy of positivism which grounds current mainstream approaches to assessment. For example, "[p]ersistence depends on other problems in learners' lives" (p. 66) that are not always controllable or grasped at the programmatic level, yet without a factoring in of such issues, accountability is skewered.

Merrifield points to the importance of "indicators as a measurement tool" (p. 66) along with problems related to selecting the wrong indicators or their inadequate utilization. Often there is a lack of indicators to measure something important, "like affective changes in learners, for example" (p. 67) that correlate with such "soft" issues like self-esteem, motivation, and persistence. In her focus on "mutual accountability," Merrifield stresses the importance of constructing indicators that will convey needed information to all of the relevant constituents at the level of intensity that they require it. As she states it, "[k]nowing who will use the information and for what purposes is at the core of the technical work of designing valid and reliable measures" (p. 67).

The inability of the field to construct such a design is a major dilemma that points not only to the technical virtuosity required to create a performance accountability system to meet the divergent needs of a diverse constituency. It also requires a coming to terms with the purposes of adult literacy education as well as the relationship between formative and summative evaluation (Lytle and Wolfe, 1989, pp. 61-62) in a system that remains largely under-funded, understaffed, and under-trained. A critical question is whether indicators of performance will be utilized as a club in a Darwinian struggle of the "survival of the fittest" (an all-too pervasive image in our current funding climate) or as an instrument for problem resolution and building both system-wide and program level capacity. Merrifield (1998) provides detailed information on some of the factors involved in making sure that indicators are specific, measurable, action-oriented, realistic, and timely (pp. 67-68). Yet it is the tough research questions that she poses, which need to be addressed, that is, if the issues of values and capacity are to come *before* a performance accountability system is developed. The following questions go to the heart of the issues with which the field struggles that will be critical to resolve in order to achieve the type of dynamic, resource-full consensus Merrifield seeks:

- Does adult education impact people's lives?
- What are the benefits to individuals and society?
- What policy initiatives are needed and what levels of resources should be provided?
- What long-term or short-term outcomes are associated with particular program designs?
- What kinds of resources are needed to support specific program designs (p. 68)

Clearly these are the questions that perplex the field and give contour to the political and epistemological battleground of the "Contested Ground" that Merrifield examines. How does the system move forward, given the reality of the sharply conflicting perspectives

that currently shape the field; the system that already is in place that cannot be easily dislodged, and the marginality of adult literacy education in the public, corporate, and governmental sectors? These are no minor problems.

Concluding Observations

Merrifield concludes her study with a call to "agree on performances," "develop, mutual accountability relationships," "build capacity for learning and system improvement," and "design and develop accountability technologies" (pp. 72-74). As she well knows, these represent daunting challenges for which she points "ways forward" through public discussion, action, and research. In these concluding remarks I will concentrate on Merifield's first two recommendations as they lay the foundation for the more technical aspects of building capacity and designing accountability technologies.

The most fundamental and problematic issue is the need "to agree on performance." This is especially difficult because this task draws out the issue of *values*, both for individuals and the "system," as well as among the diverse and often conflicting groups that comprise the constituency of adult literacy across the unequal terrain of the American social, cultural, political, and economic landscape. Through public debate, Merrifield encourages stakeholders to seek consensus along with an embrace of "newer understandings of literacy…[that] connect performance with real life" (p. 72). The issue that remains is where will ultimate power resides, if in any *single* place, in shaping the discourse system that defines "real life performance." This would include attending to the ways in which the "public opinion" of students, practitioners, administrators, as well as business and government emerges through such a debate and the forces that influence its formation.

The question that looms large on the horizon is whether business and government represent important constituencies that *participate* in the search for a broad-based *national* vision, or whether they will act to shape the field according to the more narrow dictates of their perceived interests. Current policy directives on adult literacy are not particularly encouraging, which reinforces the reality that significant change can only come through extensive mobilization from the bottom-up.

In the minds of many thoughtful advocates of adult literacy education, suspicion simultaneously resides with hope that at least a *pragmatic* consensus that significantly moves the field forward as defined by the constituents themselves, can emerge, even if more enduring issues of power, equity, and justice remain unresolved. At the least, social policy objectives would need to become considerably broadened to link personal goals of students to valued public outcomes in a manner that does not impose a system *over* the goals and outlooks of individuals, but, rather, is supportive of them.

Equally daunting is Merrifield's call to "develop mutual accountability relationships" based on "various partners knowing, understanding and accepting their roles and obligations to one another and to the system" (p.73). The quest for "mutual accountability" is particularly wistful given the reality of current social policy largely

based on the deficit model of adult literacy along with the accompanying desire for control of data, money, and the lives of students in meeting said directives. The philosophical and psychological rational for this vision among the policy elite are largely premised on the perspectives of positivism and behaviorism, respectively, while the reforms that Merrifield and other proponents of the New Literacy Studies seek are grounded in other epistemologies and theories of human behavior.

It is only through sufficiently strong advocacy among the literacy constituency based at least on a pragmatic consensus, that the field will be able muster adequate political power to *change* current social policy, however unlikely or likely such an effort might prove. Such advocacy can only realistically be effective if the progressive literacy community takes a vigorous role without either succumbing to the literacy establishment perspective or remaining so outside the normative value system of American society that they can only stress opposition over consensus. This is a tough row to hoe and there are no guarantees either against cooptation or alienation.

Moreover, to be effective, such advocacy would require something close to a social movement that the field has never seen if best practices, sound theory, and a broader perspective on the purposes of adult literacy education were ever to drive policy rather than existing social policy driving the field. This would require a more expansive notion of the public good well beyond a "cost-benefit utilitarian model" that mirrors the ethos of capitalism that dominates current policy directives (Demetrion, 1997). An alternative view *could* emerge, based upon the concept of citizenship, a viable, but underdeveloped notion for a nation whose founding ideals, if not practices, are based upon democracy and popular sovereignty. This would require a reconstruction of the body politic as currently practiced, but, nonetheless, grounded in this nation's founding ideals.

The distance between the vision and the reality may well seem unfathomable. Yet it is at least an open issue on the extent to which the political culture can move *toward* the ideal. This is particularly the case through an issue like adult literacy, which has the capacity to galvanize the body politic of the local citizenry as well as to stir the imagination of countless people. However, this is not to minimize the many tendencies to the contrary, particularly among the managerial, corporate, and governmental bureaucracy when increased programming leads to an ethos of system building defined in certain proscribed ways, that, in turn, requires additional funding as well as "accountability" along some fairly stringent lines. No doubt, faith, hope, skepticism, and suspicion uneasily reside within the hearts and minds of the diverse constituents that comprise the field, even as there is among many a desire to press forward at least when not overwhelmed with despair and cynicism.

"Contested Ground: Performance Accountability in Adult Basic Education" is one of the most important policy studies on adult literacy at the turn of the century. Merrifield examines a wide range of critical issues with which the field will need to come to terms in order to move forward in any collective sense. At the heart of her argument is the need to realize the dynamic consensus that she believes is essential if adult literacy education is ever to make any significant steps in moving from the margins to the mainstream in the

consciousness of the American public and in legislative halls. Merrifield has pointed out both the many dilemmas the field faces, as well to identify spheres of opportunity for consensus and capacity building in the quest for such a vision. The purpose of my review is to sharpen the issues upon which Merrifield sometimes seems to equivocate.

While the view of critic may seem an easier stance to assume than that of system builder, it is essential work lest what seems plausible be circumscribed by only that which may appear "realistic" in the short and moderately near term. This, in turn, reinforces the tendency to emphasize tactics and keeping the field closely aligned to the "realities" of prevailing social policy. Obviously, criticism also has its limitations especially when the critic is unconcerned with the *complexities* of current reality and offers only utopian solutions. The fact of the matter is that both Merrifield and I seek system construction while providing critical commentary on existing policy and practice. This is the case even though in "Contested Ground" the author assumes more the role of system builder while in this review I take on more the guise of critic. Together, these functions represent the warp and woof of our field in the construction of a viable national vision in the effort to move from the margins to the mainstream in a manner that builds on the best available work in adult literacy education. For an authentic consensus to emerge, this effort also needs to be consistent with the values of equity, social justice, and participatory democracy, at the least, as a powerful regulative ideal, notwithstanding the inevitable gap between the vision and the reality.

In a field where there are no quick or easy fixes, this struggle requires the collective best efforts among all that view the state of adult literacy as a major concern. This would include the willingness to struggle with critical issues of power, control, and direction that are steeped in conflict and not amenable to simple solutions. As Merrifield has so well argued, this requires dialogue, research, action, and very sharp values clarification throughout the body politic in discerning the impact of literacy in the lives of individuals and in its contribution to the public good. Assuming such a broad-based consensus could emerge from such efforts, a far from certain prospect, efficacy in moving adult literacy from the margins to the mainstream of American public and political consciousness would necessitate a substantial mobilization of the constituency that comprises the field. This may prove a long time in the coming, though future prospects remain far from closed.

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